



Can States Be Compared Based on Child Welfare Data?

State and county agencies run the nation's child welfare systems, providing a wide range of services including child protection, family preservation and support services, foster care, adoption, and often juvenile justice and mental health services. Over the last ten years the child welfare field has seen a significant growth in the availability and use of data to help understand and administer child welfare programs.

On a national level, the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting Systems (AFCARS) have become important sources of information about children in the child welfare system, providing a national picture of child maltreatment and foster care. Moreover, the federal government is using the data from these systems to inform the Child and Family Service Review process. With these national data sets available, the question often arises: **What do the data show us about how states compare in their ability to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in the child welfare system?**

Comparisons among states based exclusively on national child welfare data sources can be misleading and should not be used to judge the effectiveness of one state versus another. While the national data sets provide good national estimates, they lack reliability for interstate comparisons due to variations in state laws, policies, definitions, and data collection processes. The reliability of the data increases when each state establishes a baseline and monitors itself over time. Also, the reliability increases when states with similarities in their child welfare systems, such as those serving both child welfare and juvenile justice populations, are grouped together for a comprehensive analysis. The federal government is currently addressing some areas of variation among the states' data. Following are just a few examples that show why data cannot be compared across the states without additional information and analysis.

- **Child abuse and neglect** - Each state and the District of Columbia defines child abuse and neglect differently in their state statutes and policies. While there are similarities among these 51 or more definitions of child abuse and neglect, the differences prevent reliable comparison of the data. For instance:
 - Some states capture categories such as abandonment and emotional or mental injury in their laws, while others do not¹.
 - Some state laws include threatened harm in the definitions, while others do not².
 - Some states investigate educational neglect, while others do not. Some states investigate fetal exposure or addiction to alcohol or other harmful substances, while others do not³.
 - States require different levels of evidence to substantiate a report of abuse or neglect⁴.
- **Child abuse and neglect fatalities** – A child death may be counted as a maltreatment fatality in one state, but not in another. A few of the factors that limit the reliability of the maltreatment fatality data include the following:
 - About half the states investigate incidents that appear to be accidents (such as swimming pool drowning) to determine whether abuse or neglect played a role in the death, while other states do not⁵.
 - Some states incorporate the numbers from their child fatality review teams, while others do not. Also, the composition of the child fatality review team, the role of the team in reporting child deaths, and the extent of the review or investigation when a death occurs, varies considerably from state to state.⁶

¹ National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information. Statutes-at-a-Glance. *Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect*. (Retrieved September 2003 from: <http://www.calib.com/nccanch/statutes/define.cfm>).

² Ibid.

³ Utah Division of Child and Family Services. (2003). *Child Protective Services Allegation Survey Report*. Salt Lake City Utah: Author.

⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families. (2003). *Child Maltreatment 2001*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

⁵ Child Welfare League of America. (July 2001). *National Working Group Highlights: Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities: Clarification Survey Results*. Washington DC: Author.

⁶ Ibid.

- **Child maltreatment in foster care** – There are nuances in the child protection and foster care data that make it difficult to accurately compare data across states. The federal measure on child maltreatment in foster care uses the foster parent and facility staff perpetrator categories from NCANDS and the foster care population in AFCARS. In this measure:
 - When a child is abused or neglected by a relative foster care provider, the incident is captured differently among states. Since the caregiver is both a relative and a foster care provider, the *relative* relationship may be captured in the perpetrator data in some states (not the foster care relationship), which is not part of the federal measure on child maltreatment in foster care⁷.
 - Residential facility staff are counted as perpetrators of maltreatment in most, but not all, states. The victims in these cases are not always in foster care, and thus the measure of maltreatment in foster care in these states has the potential to be inflated.⁸
- **Placement stability** – Data on placement stability contains several discrepancies in how states count the number of children's placements, and reflects considerable variation in the populations served by the child welfare agencies. For instance:
 - A child in foster care may spend a short time outside of his or her foster home (or other placement), receiving services in a hospital or detention or incarceration placement. States vary as to whether they count these as placement changes. In 2000 59% of states counted medical hospital stays, 65% counted detention or incarceration placements, and 76% counted placements in psychiatric hospitals. There were also differences in circumstances and timeframes in which these placements were counted⁹.
 - Some child welfare agencies serve the juvenile justice population, and some juvenile justice youth are included in the national data¹⁰. Since placement issues are different in juvenile justice, the placement stability data may be affected. Therefore, when analyzing placement stability data it is important to group states that serve similar populations or limit the data to just the child welfare population.
- **Relationship between outcomes** – The child welfare field is just beginning to study how measured outcomes correlate and interact with one another. There is evidence that performance in one outcome area affects performance in another, adding another complexity to cross-state comparison. For example:
 - Analysis of federal outcome data demonstrated a relationship between high percentages of reunification within 12 months and high re-entries within 12 months. Likewise, states with low reunification tended to have low re-entries within the 12-month periods¹¹. Therefore, when assessing reunification outcomes it would be critical to evaluate data and policies relevant to re-entries, and perhaps other areas, at the same time.

The child welfare field lacks crosscutting standards and definitions that would allow reliable comparison among states. The two federal data sources provide important national information as well as a basis to work toward more comparable data. Relevant policy guidance begins to add clarity, but clear, common operational definitions are needed to enhance inter-state reliability in the data. Also, additional research is needed to understand the relationship between different performance measures.

Much can be learned by comparing state child welfare programs, allowing states to share their successes and challenges in ensuring the safety, permanency and well-being of children. Data play an important role in such comparisons, but significant time and resources must be invested in understanding the nuances of the data. NDAS helps present some of the variations through footnotes, text-based tables, and National Working Group Highlights bulletins. Further information about data nuances and data quality may be gathered directly from the states of interest.

Prepared by Kristen Woodruff, Project Manager for the National Working Group To Improve Child Welfare Data, kristen@cwla.org.

⁷ Child Welfare League of America. (October 2002). *National Working Group Highlights: Child Maltreatment In Foster Care: Understanding The Data*. Washington DC: Author.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Child Welfare League of America. (April 2002). *National Working Group Highlights: Placement Stability Measure and Diverse Out-of-Home Care Populations*. Washington DC: Author.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families. (2003). *Safety, Permanency, Well-being. Child Welfare Outcomes 2000: Annual Report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.